

## Story Number Five

### Mirian and Nino<sup>1</sup>

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If you're a courier cruising around Tbilisi on your moped and through your summer days (I'm delighted with myself for adapting the word "cruising" to both time and space in the same sentence), my advice is to keep a bottle of iced water in your trunk and drink it whenever you stop. Also, get used to the fact that you'll only tan on your face, arms, and knees.

The last time I was fully tanned was a few years ago when Nata Bichikashvili and I perpetrated an act of shameless deception against a potato chips company and convinced them that we had extensive experience working as entertainers. By some divine power, we managed to keep kids cheery on a Batumi beach for 8 hours a day, for 35 days.

We were paid 55 Laris<sup>2</sup> per day.

Fifty-five times thirty-five, and why would I have a care in the world?

Well, of course, I had a care.

Two weeks before I went to Batumi, I promised myself that with the money I made there, I would repay my debts, and with whatever remained, I would buy bicycles for my girlfriend and myself.

A week before I left for Batumi, my girlfriend left me. As money for one bicycle had been freed up, I allowed myself the luxury of drowning my sorrows in alcohol.

Thank goodness I managed to pay my debts.

I returned to Tbilisi with just 400 Laris, an alcohol addiction, and a tan.

The thought of going home didn't excite me. I stopped the bus on the Digomi highway and went to Gldani, to Mariam Ochigava's house, which served as a meet-up point for my childhood friends.

"You should be ashamed of yourself! You worked for so long and have nothing more than 400 Laris to show for it! What are you going to do with this money?" Mariam scolded me.

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<sup>1</sup> [Notes: In the early 4th century, Georgia (then known as Iberia) adopted Christianity as its state religion, making it one of the first nations to do so. This conversion is attributed to Saint Nino, who evangelized the region and is credited with introducing Christianity to the Georgian people. King Mirian III and Queen Nana's conversion in 337 AD played a pivotal role in this process, leading to the widespread acceptance of Christianity throughout Georgia. The adoption of Christianity has since remained a significant aspect of Georgia's cultural and religious identity. By using this title, the author alludes to a subsequent frightening episode in his life when he was compelled to embrace Christianity once more. Moreover, another character named Nino takes on a satirical importance within the stories depicted in this chapter.]

<sup>2</sup> Lari is the local currency in Georgia.

"Well, I could give my debit card to Mister Nika Razmadze, he'll go downstairs to the store and get me cognac and snacks. Because I can't stop shaking, I feel so bad."

"I don't want your money. How did you manage to spend this much on booze? You didn't use to drink. Whatever compelled you to become a drunk now? Were you wasted when you were entertaining the kids?"

"No, I was entertaining them with a hangover. I drank in the evenings."

"Didn't you tell me to defeat depression by keeping myself busy, and not by getting drunk? Well done for not following your own advice. You're such a demagogue."

"Man, that job was what gave me depression in the first place. Imagine being utterly desperate and having to cheerfully announce the following words to kids aged five to thirteen: "All right, kids! 'Tasty Dumplings' move to the left, 'Fierce Lions' – on the right. Now, who wants chips? Let me hear you scream." But this is the last day I'm drinking."

"You pitiful fool. I will go to the store, but I am only getting you beer, and starting from tomorrow – no more drinking, really! At least buy yourself something worthwhile with these 400 Laris, as a keepsake for a whole summer's work."

I got wasted that day too.

As I was told later, and as I also managed to reconstruct in my own recollections, it all happened something like this – Ochigava was furiously looking for something on her laptop, while occasionally telling off our cocker spaniel:

"Yuck, Tsuna, let go of that. Oh, you have not been out for a walk today yet. Razmadze, do you and Sophie still want to visit Kesa?"

Mariam Kesanashvili<sup>3</sup> is our childhood friend and lives in Berlin.

"Yes, I do."

"Well, Sophie is texting me; there's a sale going on right now. Tell Nika, if we get it today, a two-way ticket will be 250 Laris, and it will get more expensive later on. There, I told you, the flight is on October 8."

"Forget about it. I have not sold my bike yet; there will be another sale some other time."

"Man, take my debit card. Ew, Tsuna! Wish you had not named this innocent dog - Tsuna. I don't like this name. Take the card and pay it back when you sell your bike, and at least you will have some pocket money left over too."

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<sup>3</sup> Kesa is short for Kesanashvili. In Georgian, last names are often abbreviated into nicknames among a group of friends. Like Ochigava, who is later referred to as Ochi.

"If I take 250 from your pathetic 400 Laris, you will spend the remaining 150 on booze within a day."

"Oh, come on, take it and say hi to Kesa from me when you get there."

"By the way, you've never been to Berlin, isn't that right? Not just Berlin, you've never been anywhere abroad at all, isn't that so?" Nika asked me.

"No, dingbat, I haven't. Generally, if I don't see the Tbilisi TV tower, I start to feel uncomfortable and turn to alcohol for solace."

"Had you not blown all of your money, we could've dragged you along. You're such an idiot."

"Kesa will be visiting here in December anyway, for two weeks."

"Yeah, but you've never been past Batumi ever in your life."

"Why not? I've been to Poti, at Ochigava's."

We laughed. I got even more wasted as time went on. The room was spinning. Then, Ochi, who was buying a ticket for Nika, asked for my phone. She said, "I would get a code." Here, she said, "I got him a ticket. There, you got a text." She turned back to me. I asked, "What does it say?" She said, "It says your balance is 250 Laris, shouldn't it be 150 Laris? Dude, don't you know how to count?" she said. "You've come back with 500 Laris from Batumi, not 400. It is obviously fate, Temore, it's fate. Go lie down in the other room if you're dozing off, or fine, fine, just lie down where you are. Here, I will get you a blanket. If your sorry ass can't hold the liquor, why do you drink at all?" she added.

The next morning, Nika Razmadze woke me up and gave me a very efficient rundown:

"All right, mister, you now have zero Laris in your account. Today is September 4; on October 8, Sophie, you, and me are flying to Berlin. Naku and Ochi cannot come; they have some other stuff going on. Kesa knows about Sophie and me; she doesn't know about you. Hopefully, she has space for you too at home. I think it's best if we don't even tell Kesa about you. You will show up unannounced; it will be a surprise. She'll be happy. I will sell my moped over the next few days and give you back your 250 Laris in Euros. Your objective now is to find a job and save up some money for our visit, and also, you should borrow some to hold in your account for a few hours at the border crossing. When Ochi is back from work, she will help us buy travel insurance, and also, make hotel reservations for the customs, but we will cancel those when we get in. We will crash at Kesa's for 10 days. We will be back in Tbilisi on October 17. You can go back to rehearsals from the 18th. Can you believe your luck, blockhead? Can you grasp the magnitude of your good fortune? You will travel beyond Georgia for the first time in your life, and it will be in Germany, of all places; you will see the inside of a plane. I'll let you take the window seat if you want. Just get off your ass already, take Tsuna on a walk; she needs take a piss and tire herself out a bit. Then go to the mini mart, opposite our apartment building. Ochi already talked to the lady; she will give you bread and Fanta on credit. I'll make you scrambled eggs, the way you like it. Ok, get up now! Tsuna, see, Temore is taking you out for a walk! Man, you

won't be able to get by with just 250 Laris there. I don't want to hear about you drinking any more. Focus on finding a job."

When I arrived in Berlin, I then ended up in Hamburg, completely alone. I'll tell you this story too, but not now.

I found a job only after I came back from Germany. On the third day of that job, I got into an accident on Jikia street. More precisely, I braked incorrectly on a rainy street and slid right into the wheels of a car in front of me.

People hurried over to me. There was almost nothing wrong with me, other than the fact that I was terrified. A very worried-looking Black man got out of the car:

"Is he okay? It's okay?"

I gave him a thumbs up. He smiled, lifted my moped, and started checking it for damage. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a guy came up to me and whispered a question:

"My friend, are you definitely all right?"

"Yes, yes, it's nothing."

"Well, if you are good, then, fuck this guy."

"It was my fault," I interrupted him and walked away immediately. I was so stressed that I didn't have the energy to get into an argument.

"I am sorry and goodbye."

"Really, okay?"

"Yes, man, don't worry." I left.

I wondered to myself if I should take a break and deliver the rest of the orders the next day, but I knew that I would either continue working the same day, or I would never get over the fear again.

I continued working, and since then, it has been as though I've embraced Christianity anew. Or more precisely, I remind myself of the words that I heard from the priests when I was a kid, words that I thought came from the Christ but, as I found out later, belonged to a Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius: "to live each day as if it were your last." As a result of my newfound faith, I've started to ride my bike more slowly and carefully. As I've started to ride more slowly and carefully, I've made a few discoveries.

For example, while I used to buy gas just from the closest gas station, I soon found myself gravitating towards the place where, even though the gas was more expensive by 10 Tetris, I received a well-

rehearsed "thank you, have a good trip" in return. Obviously, I knew that this was nothing more than a marketing ruse, but whether I wanted it or not, it worked, and I became chained in loyalty to this company. At first, I was angry with myself, but then I also decided to use my brain. Now, whenever I deliver a package, I say:

"Enjoy your purchase!"

"Thank you," they say.

"No, thank YOU."

If you're not a deliveryman, you'll find it hard to change money in stores and similar places. But if you are a deliveryman, I recommend taking your helmet with you when asking for change. It won't hurt to mention that you are on a delivery, your customer is waiting for you, and you need change. Of course, they will give you the change; what else will they do?

In general, remember that sales consultants, gas station operators, and fellow deliverymen, who honk at you in greeting when they see you – these are all your friends and they will help if you ever need anything. So, you had better help them too.

Public minivan and designer brand car drivers are not your friends. You irk almost all of them; expensive car owners are irritated probably because they are jealous of your advantage in traffic jams, and they are also worried about you inadvertently scratching their cars. The public minivan drivers hate you probably because you overtake them incorrectly, and you do that because after being completely dazed by their black, toxic exhaust fumes, you have no other thought in your head but to overtake them.

There are two things that surprise me when I work as a deliveryman – why or how can some moped owners ride without mirrors, and why do most cabs drive in such a way that they do not give up the right lane, also keeping one side of the car dragging along the left lane, all the while driving at a heart-wrenchingly slow speed. Be cautious; it is not as safe to ride in the right lane as it may seem at first. Stay away from public minivans and cabs. Those dickheads will fly over from the second lane into the first without hesitation if a customer waves them down and will not care if they kill you. Apart from this, some of them drive in from the secondary to the primary street at such terrifying speeds that you might... (this sentence could end with any number of metaphors, but I could not pick out one).

One day, when I had just started working, some road workers pissed me off. They were paving a section of the road in the fourth micro-district of Digomi without blocking off the traffic. So, I took that road; there was a small traffic jam. I slowed down, put my feet down, and the asphalt was so hot that it burned a hole through the soles of my orphan pair of sneakers. Really! But, I was not as worried about the shoes. More importantly, the tires survived.

I turned back, found an alternative route, and sped up towards Varketili. I had two orders left to deliver: after a delivery in the "Varketili Sami" fourth micro-district, I was due at the airport settlement. I had heard about the aerodrome settlement; it's somewhere around the Varketili subway

stop, but it was the first time I heard about the airport neighborhood.

At that time, with the aim of raising awareness about our company, I was supposed to ask customers to take a photo with our accessories and post them on Facebook. For some reason, and to my great shame, I only remembered to ask customers about this when I found them beautiful or odd-looking in some way. I do not remember which criterion was met by Lizi from Varketili.

"Here is your package, and please, if possible, we would like to ask you to take a photo with the item, if you like it, upload it to Facebook, tag our company, and give us a rating or write us a review."

"Oh, I didn't get this for myself. This is for my boyfriend. If he doesn't like this bracelet, forget the photo; he might even break up with me."

"If he breaks up with you, don't worry. That number I used to call you earlier? It's mine. I also broke up with my girlfriend recently," I smiled.

"What? Are you flirting with me?"

"Enjoy your purchase," I said. I was overjoyed to get out of there too. But remember this well: you must not flirt with the customers, joke around with them, or be snarky of all things. It will come back to you.

"Hello, are you Nino?"

"Yes."

"Nino, I am the deliveryman. I have your order for the airport settlement, and I don't know where it is. Is it close to the aerodrome settlement? Or near the airport?"

"Which way are you coming from? From Tbilisi or Lilo?"

"What do you think, Nino?" Now, why did I need to be a snake.

"Excuse me?" I cleared my throat. "I am coming from Varketili."

"Call me when you're close to the airport exit. I will tell you the way from there."

The place was very far away. After I exited towards the airport and finally found this sad settlement, the first street I noticed was that of Sandro Shanshiashvili. This name was vaguely familiar, and I think I recalled that he was a playwright who had translated some of Sandro Akhmeteli's plays into Georgian. But I was so tired that I could not remember the plays and was even doubting whether this Sandro Shanshiashvili was a playwright at all. I found the customer, quickly handed over the package, took the money, returned the change, and hurried back home.

I went into a mini-mart on my way back. "TBC or Bank of Georgia<sup>4</sup>?"

"I am paying cash."

"6 Laris and 80 Tetris. Here's your change."

"Enjoy your purchase," you know that feeling of being so exhausted that you sometimes mechanically repeat phrases you've learned by heart.

It was the end of October. On this day, I was just fresh off my trip to Germany.

#UADP<sup>5</sup>

### **Nino and the City**

You see planes ascending into the air every day.

So close to Europe's allure, yet you live so far away,

Nino, oh the settler of the airport, kin of Tantalus.

You are not beautiful enough to be asked for a photo of the bracelet for your Facebook story.

I am sincerely sorry.

I accidentally gave you 10 Laris extra for the change.

I didn't even come back for it. You live so far away.

I know you are second to none, no need for a comparison.

In fact, the city's troubles stem from its

Decentralization.

**Translated by:** Ketí Khukhunashvili

**Edited by:** Lowry Pei

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<sup>4</sup> In Georgia, POS terminals are made by the two dominant banks and in order to avoid transaction fees, stores keep terminals for both banks and therefore, need to ask which card the customer will be using before each transaction.

<sup>5</sup> [*Notes:* UADP is short for Universally Accessible Dramatic Poetry.]